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ABSTRACT

Prepared as part of a series applying recent research in oral and written communication instruction to classroom practice, this booklet focuses on how children and young adults make meaning in speech and writing and on ways teachers can encourage their language development. Following a brief introduction, the first major section of the booklet analyzes communication competence according to four principles: (1) sensitivity to situational factors, including medium of communication, function, setting, topic, discourse process, and audience; (2) flexibility; (3) performance; and (4) feedback. The second section discusses the school as a communication context and examines the different speaking and writing situations students encounter daily. The third presents a model of communication development stressing social awareness, coding, and reconstruction of experience, and the fourth section examines the interdependence among these dimensions. The concluding section discusses teaching for communication competence. Examples of student work are included throughout the booklet. (FL)

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# Talking and Writing: Building Communication Competence

By Donald L. Rubin and Kenneth J. Kantor

**The Talking and Writing Series, K-12: Successful Classroom Practices**

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The purpose of this series is to provide information to assist teachers and curriculum planners at all grade levels in improving communication skills across the major disciplines.

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## PREFACE

During the past decade, teachers, education administrators and researchers, and the general public have become increasingly concerned about students' ability to communicate. This broad public concern for improvement in education led to the enactment of Title II, Basic Skills Improvement Act, Public Law 95-561. The Basic Skills legislation encourages Federal, State, and local education agencies to utilize " . . . all available resources for elementary and secondary education to improve instruction so that all children are able to master the basic skills of reading, mathematics, and effective communication, both written and oral." Section 209 of the act specifically authorizes the Secretary of Education to collect and analyze information about the results of activities carried out under Title II. Thus, improved instruction in the basic communication skills—speaking, listening, and writing—has become the focus of programs and research projects throughout the country.

The booklets in this series, *The Talking and Writing Series, K-12: Successful Classroom Practices*, provide information to assist teachers and curriculum planners at all grade levels to improve communication skills across all major disciplines. Developed under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education, the 12 booklets apply recent research in oral and written communication instruction to classroom practice. They contain descriptions of teaching practices; summaries and analyses of pertinent theories and research findings; practical suggestions for teachers; and lists of references and resources. Also included is a booklet on inservice training which suggests how the series can be used in professional development programs.

The booklets were developed through the efforts of an Editorial Advisory Committee comprised of 14 professionals in both the academic and research areas of written and oral communication education. The group worked with the sponsoring agency, the Department of Education's Basic Skills Improvement Program, and Dingle Associates, Inc., a professional services firm.

The committee members, in consultation with the Department of Education staff, chose issues and developed topics. Ten of the 14 committee members authored papers. The committee reviewed the papers and provided additional expertise in preparing the final booklets, which were edited and designed by Dingle Associates.

We are grateful to the committee members, advisors, and all others who contributed their expertise to the project. The committee members were:

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It is hoped that the booklets in this series will be valuable to classroom and administrative professionals in developing or restructuring their communication skills programs. They may also be useful to community and parent groups in their dialogue with members of the educational system. The ultimate benefit of this project, however, will be realized in our children's enhanced ability to communicate, both orally and in written language.

Sherwood R. Simons
Project Officer

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# TALKING AND WRITING: BUILDING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

This booklet focuses on the ordinary extraordinariness of children and young adults making meaning in speech and in writing, how it happens, and how we, as teachers, can encourage this communication development.

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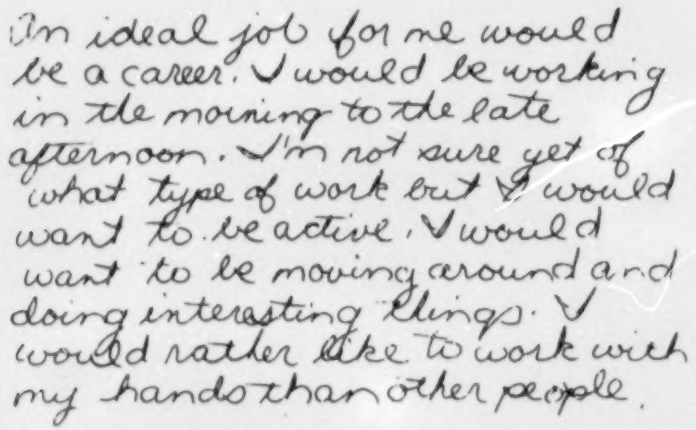
Toby, a tenth-grader, writes and speaks about jobs. Her teacher first asks her to "free-write" about an ideal occupation.


An ideal job for me would be a career. I would be working in the morning to the late afternoon. I'm not sure yet of what type of work but I would want to be active. I would want to be moving around and doing interesting things. I would rather like to work with my hands than other people.

Later, Toby participates in a simulated job interview for a position at a pancake house. The interviewer is a volunteer parent. Before beginning the interview, Toby has filled out a job application form.

**Interviewer:** Now, it says here that you would like to work as a cashier. Any particular reason why?

**Toby:** Well, because when I would be working . . . Well, see, the reason I didn't say cook is because I don't know how to cook and I don't like to cook. And, ah, the reason I didn't say hostess is because I would be, you know, talking with people a lot and everything. And so I'd rather be a cashier, just doing something with my hands and figuring up and things like that.

**Interviewer:** Good. Ah, let me see. Now, you haven't had a job before, so why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself as a student.

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**Toby:** You mean how I like school and stuff?

**Interviewer:** Yeah. That kind of thing.

**Toby:** Well, school is alright. I don't like school that much, though. But it's OK. I want to, you know, get as much education in as I can before I have to graduate. And then, there are some teachers that I like. I get along with most of my teachers. There's . . . there's only been a few that I haven't liked.

At first glance, Toby's language seems quite remarkable. Since many of us are trained in a pathology model of education (we are the knowledge doctors, and students and patients come to us with conditions which we must remediate), we notice certain weaknesses first. The last sentence of Toby's free-writing is ambiguous. Does she prefer working with her hands more than working with other people, or is she more partial to manual work than other people are?

Her first response in the interview begins with a false start, and vacuous expressions like "you know" and "things like that" appear throughout the speech sample.

But observe, instead, Toby's strengths. In both passages, she shows an ability to use language conditionally, objectify her feelings, and examine them from a number of angles without rushing to an overly simple conclusion. "I'm not sure yet what type of work," she writes. She explains to the interviewer that she recognizes both good and bad aspects of school. Toby can do this because her speech and writing permit her to generalize from feelings and experiences. The power of abstraction enables Toby to put thoughts into perspective.

Toby also shows an ability to organize written and oral discourse so as to develop and modify statements. To be sure, there are points that need clarifying. The concept of "career" apparently has some special meaning for her which she fails to reveal to her readers. But Toby does explain what she means by "active" work in the two final sentences of the free-writing. In the interview, Toby's false start seems to reflect a change in course. She has discovered a better way to organize her reasoning. What follows is a process of eliminating the more undesirable job options, leaving Toby with a choice that she can tolerate. Similarly, Toby demonstrates that she can use a variety of stylistic devices to contrast and qualify. Notice the counterpoint of her final reply in the interview: " . . . alright . . . though . . . but . . . there are some . . . most . . . only been a few . . . "

Through using these logical devices and elaborating meanings, Toby shows regard for the needs of her audiences. She is aware that writing and speaking are social transactions. Even her free-writing, for which Toby, herself, was the primary audience, follows the conventions of legibility and standard usage which aid readers. Furthermore, Toby indicates through her request

for clarification in the interview that she is an active listener. She is trying to understand the interviewer's viewpoint so that she can respond appropriately.

In short, Toby shows in these two brief passages that she is indeed a sophisticated communicator. In speaking and writing, she can transform her experiences and feelings so that they can be examined and understood. She uses her communication resources to unpack and modify her meanings. And she takes into account the needs and characteristics of her audiences.

Communication competence has no end point. It is a matter of lifelong development toward increasingly effective expression and understanding. Surely, Toby can refine her speaking and writing skills in a number of respects. And just as surely, her formal schooling has a vital role to play in fostering those skills. But that is not to detract from the fact that Toby, like all students, communicates in ways that should inspire respect from us, her teachers.

## CHARACTERIZING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

A student's spoken or written language can be described from a number of viewpoints. We could, for example, take a prescriptive approach and describe it as being either correct or incorrect. Thus, if a child says, "Chicago ain't the capital of Illinois, Springfield is where the capital is at," we might say this language is incorrect since it violates the prescriptive attitude. What is obviously ignored is that this child has successfully communicated accurate information. Another problem involves the issue of what standard should be used to judge correctness. Language is as much a growing, changing organism as is a human being. Many people use the word "ain't," or end sentences with prepositions. Finally, there are some circumstances in which "correct" language simply does not work as well as more casual forms. In an auto repair shop, for example, you may risk your credibility if you ask, "To which contact is this wire supposed to lead?"

We acknowledge that a concern for linguistic propriety can be well motivated in the sense that "errors" often call attention to themselves, detract from the effect of a message on an audience, or convey a tone which a writer or speaker does not intend. The word "ain't," for example, conveys meaning adequately. But it also waves a red flag for some listeners, signalling that the speaker may be unsophisticated or ignorant. By the same token, "ain't" signals solidarity and familiarity to other listeners. Speakers may wish to avoid "ain't" in some situations and use it in others. So that a focus on communication competence is not inconsistent with the responsibility to teach patterns of formal communication. But the framework of communication competence encourages teachers to judge messages according to their *effectiveness* in achieving writers' and speakers' purposes within specific situations. Instead of labelling a student's work as correct or incorrect, teachers note whether it is appropriate or inappropriate to the context.

The notion of *communication* competence can be better understood by

contrasting it with *linguistic* competence. Linguists and psychologists claim that native speakers of a language possess rich knowledge about the structure of their language, knowledge that goes far beyond those speakers' ability to articulate any principles of grammar or semantics. For example, one can understand, and even produce, sentences that have never before been uttered; determine when two sentences express the same meaning; and tell when a single sentence can be interpreted in two ways. To explain these kinds of insights about language, we view linguistic competence as a set of abstract mental rules of which we are not normally aware. Although factors like limited memory, aroused emotions, or limited vocabulary sometimes affect our performance, we are for the most part capable of applying these rules in producing and understanding an unlimited number of sentences.

Children acquire linguistic competence not as a result of any direct instruction, but simply because of innate capacities as humans. Parents do not reward children for linguistically well-formed sentences or punish them for incorrect ones. Instead, they praise children for the accuracy of their statements. When baby points to a picture and says, "That a armadillo," we do not respond, "No, Emmy, that *is an* armadillo." At the same, time children do not merely imitate the language that they hear around them. Children regularly produce forms like "wented" and "tooked" which they have never heard from adults. These "errors" show that children are creating linguistic generalizations (rules). In these cases, they have overgeneralized regular verb endings to irregular verbs. Finally, children acquire linguistic competence at an age when their other intellectual abilities are not nearly as sophisticated. They enter public school already knowing virtually all the grammatical resources of their language.

This may be an impressive picture of linguistic competence, but it far underestimates our language abilities. Not only do we know about the structure of our language, but more importantly, we know a great deal about how to use our communication codes in real situations. The notion of communicative competence was first proposed by Dell Hymes, the anthropologist/folklorist/linguist/educator. In his monograph, *On Communicative Competence*, Hymes reminds us:

> We have to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. A child acquires a repertoire of speech acts, is able to take part in speech acts and to evaluate the speech acts of others . . . . The engagement of language in social life has a positive, productive aspect. There are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless.

Teachers can readily help students see that they have internalized rules for language use by asking them to think of all the ways that they might address someone. Ask them also to think of situations in which they might use these

terms. For example, "What would you call your boss if she was not much older than you and acted kind of chummy?" Or, "What would you call a friend of your father's you barely know?" One class developed a chart like this:

| Terms of Address | Example | Situation |
|---|---|---|
| first name | Richard, Yolanda | casual, equals, not much age difference |
| nickname | Ricky, Beads | close friends, younger |
| cutesy name | Sweety Pie, Poochie | very close, much younger (baby) |
| Mr. + last name | Mr. Weitz | male, somewhat formal to very formal, he has authority over you |
| Miss + last name | Miss Farley | female, unmarried, somewhat formal to very formal, keeps distance between you, she has authority |
| Mrs. + last name | Mrs. Nitos | female, married, somewhat formal to very formal, she has authority |
| Ms. + last name | Ms. Frye | female, marriage status not important to her here, somewhat formal to very formal, she has authority |
| Ma'am | Yes, Ma'am | female, shows respect |
| Sir | Yes, Sir | male, shows respect |
| title + last name | Dr. Malcolm, President Reagan | shows respect for position |
| last name alone | Jones, Devries | you have authority or power |
| family relation + first name | Aunt Esther | family, probably older or unfamiliar or family position is important to the person |
| nothing | Hey! | unsure of relationship, lack of respect |

Although we do not often deliberate about what to call someone, we do operate according to a system much like this. As adults, for example, we become aware of the system mostly when we make a mistake ("Hello, Jacky." "That's *Dr.* Dintler if you please.") or when we face an ill-defined interper-

sonal situation. (What do you call your school principal when she is younger than you and you literally bump into each other at a disco?) Nor are these just matters of politeness and good manners. Relationships are defined in part through these terms of address. Can you remember what it meant the first time you called your father's friend by his first name?

Choosing the appropriate term of address shows sensitivity to the context in which we are speaking, its formality, and the characteristics and values of our listeners. We must be flexible in the sense that we need to control a wide range of terms of address. We must perform the communication act, actually utter the words, in an appropriate tone of voice. And we must be receptive to audience feedback to discover if the listener is offended or accepts the definition of our relationship that we have conveyed. Communication competence can be analyzed according to these very four principles: sensitivity, flexibility, performance, and feedback.

**Sensitivity**

To express themselves in appropriate ways, communicatively competent individuals must be sensitive to a number of situational features. With respect to the example of terms of address, I must sense whether my listener perceives me as an equal or subordinate. I must recognize when I am in a setting that demands a particular form of address. For example, I may refer to my principal as "Ms. Lopez" in front of my students, but as "Phyllis" when she comes to my home for dinner. In general, situationally appropriate expression requires attention to six aspects of communicative context.

1. **Medium of communication** Although both writing and speaking are forms of communication, written language is not the same as spoken language. Their similarities and differences are discussed further on in the booklet. For now, we want to make it clear that just like speech, writing skill is part and parcel of communication competence, and conforms to the same basic principles of situational appropriateness. We can also regard in similar ways all the nonverbal media that accompany oral language—gestures, facial expressions, touch, how people arrange themselves spatially, voice tone and volume, and even our clothes.

2. **Audience.** In choosing what to call someone, we have shown that speakers are sensitive to listeners' age, status, degree of familiarity with the speaker, and so on. In writing this pamphlet, we are constantly trying to keep you, our reader, in mind. We must make guesses about what interests you, what experiences we can assume you have shared, and with what ideas you have already come into contact. Our job is especially difficult because we do not really have much information about you. So we attempt to create in our minds a representation of the audience. This process of mentally constructing one's audience is called "social perspective-taking." As we write, we try to view our message from your viewpoint.

Effective communication is very much dependent on social perspective-taking. Imagine that you want to persuade your friend to go to a movie with you. He wants to stay home alone and read. Whatever you decide to say to him will depend on your knowledge of his or her attitudes and values. You might choose to capitalize on the individual's reading interest and say, "I hear the movie is pretty much true to the book. You said you liked that story, didn't you?" And you might add the universal appeal to thrift: "C'mon, it'll be my treat."

We do not suggest that audience awareness or any other aspect of communication competence is necessarily deliberate; in fact, many of these decisions probably occur intuitively. Our sense of audience is often more a vague feeling that we acquire from many reading and listening experiences than a specific catalog of audience types. The means for coaxing a friend to go to a movie generally comes to us instinctively rather than by conscious design. At the same time, audience awareness is goal-directed, and even sometimes deliberately so, as we seek to achieve certain ends through our communication.

3. **Function**. That communication is purposeful is an obvious point, but we nevertheless lose sight of it often. For example, if we ask students to give an oral report about what they do in their spare time, or to write a paper about summer vacations, we have really assigned them a very difficult task. They cannot begin to speak or write until they can create some purpose for their discourse. For example, a student might decide to relate an amusing incident, and thus entertain the reader. Another student might decide to write a persuasive paper to convince readers to use summer vacations in volunteer work. The two students will each draw on very different styles and strategies as a result of their differing purposes.

Much of what children learn during communication development pertains not only to the structure of language, but also to its uses. They learn, for example, that a sentence—"Do you know what time it is?"—functions as an order to go to bed, despite its question form. They learn how to get a turn in a conversation, and how to recognize the turn-taking demands of others. They learn to use "If . . . then" constructions to convince one to act. They learn that if they want to describe an object to Grandpa over the telephone, they must use explicit language and avoid egocentric expressions such as, "It looks like that thing over there."

There is no one exhaustive list of communication functions. In fact, an interesting class exercise asks students to "Brainstorm all the things we can do with words." Most of us are familiar with the

four traditional modes of discourse: narrating, describing, persuading, and explaining. The Speech Communication Association National Competencies Project, described in a series of booklets edited by Barbara Wood, lists five functions: expressing feelings, controlling others, imagining, describing, and performing social rituals. James Britton and his colleagues in the British Schools Council divide language functions into three categories: expressive, and branching from it, transactional, and poetic. Still another way of thinking about functions lists the numerous speech acts that we can perform just through using communication: promising, pleading, betting, reporting, christening, theorizing, and so on.

4. **Setting.** Leaving the classroom at change of the periods, some students undergo a change as dramatic as Clark Kent's transformation to Superman. We wonder why we cannot coax two successive words from them in class discussion when we know that they are hallway, talk-show celebrities. Physical and institutional settings noticeably affect our patterns of communication. We speak differently in the classroom than in the teachers' lounge, and differently again at home. We have distinct styles suitable for banks, for saloons, for professional meetings, and for places of worship. Conversations vary depending on whether we sit next to our partner on a couch, or face him or her across a massive desk. Classroom talk also varies when seats are arranged in rows as opposed to a circle. Students write differently when they are required to sit in wooden desks for 30 minutes of uninterrupted writing compared to when they are permitted to move about with freer time limits.

5. **Topic.** Sportscasters have a special love affair with the English verb. Teams rarely "win" or "lose," they "vanquish," "pulverize," "mow down," "yield," "evaporate," or "wither." The subject of sports seems to engender such vivid vocabulary. Similarly, other kinds of topics affect communication style. A different tone is used to discuss current events than to describe great dining experiences. We talk about family differently than we talk about movie stars. In some bilingual communities, one language may be used to speak about school and another to speak about home.

6. **Discourse process.** Finally, regard a talk or a piece of writing as a dynamic, growing organism. Think about the stages of a typical telephone conversation, say, in which you want to ask someone for a ride to work. The conversation begins with greetings; you do not state immediately your purpose for calling, but instead make small talk to build rapport and a feeling of good will. Then, you say, "Well I did have a specific reason for calling . . . ." The other person responds to your request. You express gratitude and offer

your friend another chance to back out of the obligation. After the other person confirms the arrangement, you say, "Gee, that's great. By the way did you hear . . . ," and introduce more small talk. You end by restating the arrangement, offering thanks again, and saying goodbye. Communicatively competent speakers know how such conversations progress and speak appropriately at each stage.

They are likewise adept at creating the setting for a story at the beginning, and resolving it at the end. In writing an essay, they know how to develop each point in turn and tie things together at the end. Some types of speaking and writing convey strong expectations about what goes where. For example, an after-dinner speech begins with an obligatory joke. An Italian sonnet has 14 lines, the last 6 of which resolve a conflict.

We have described these six features of communication context in some detail for several reasons. First, we can recognize that communication competence represents an organized system of knowledge, not just a collection of arbitrary norms for acceptable speaking and writing. Identifying the features can also help us to understand in what areas our students need more varied practice. For example, we may recognize that almost all our speech work takes the form of oral reports to the class. We might decide to have students conduct interviews with older members of the community. Or, we might realize that we have been neglecting the expressive function in our class writing. Perhaps most important, identifying the features of communication contexts can help us construct learning experiences that provide for authentic communication. Is there an audience for our students' expression? Can they see some genuine purpose? Is the setting conducive to this task? Have we allowed the discourse process to run full cycle?

**Flexibility**

Can you recall a time when you were at your desk, perhaps writing a chatty letter to a friend or relative, and you remembered that your lesson plans were due the next day? You swept aside the pleasant writing activity, with its "Oh, by the way" and "Did I mention to you . . . " Instead, you began work on the more dreary task, filling in the space for learner objectives with "The students will . . . " and completing the list of learner activities with "Rd pp. 7-13 if time permits."

We all control a variety of communication styles and switch between them as the situation requires. Some people have very extensive repertoires of communication acts. They can write flowing narratives such as might appear in popular magazines. They can speak assertively when their rights are being challenged. Perhaps, they are also skilled at drawing out strangers, and can be counted upon to do a good job with the PTO meeting minutes. Communicatively competent individuals do not speak or write according to any

single standard. Instead, they adapt to situations by intuitively selecting from their broad repertoires of stylistic options and strategies.

The most dramatic instances of this kind of flexibility occur among bilinguals. Bilingual speakers may begin a conversation with a stranger in their second language. But when they warm to their new acquaintance and discover a common cultural bond, they may signal the strengthening of the relationship by switching to their first language.

Each of us speaks a particular dialect of our language (or languages). The dialect conveys our social identity, our membership in a speech community—Bostonian, Appalachian, New Yorker, or Iowan; black, Norwegian-American, Chicano, or Puerto Rican; working class, middle class, or upper class. Some dialects are considered standard because they are historically associated with sources of economic and political power. Nonstandard dialects, however, are not inferior, in any respect, to standard varieties. They are equally pleasant sounding to an outsider's ear. They are capable of sustaining all the functions of communication. Nor does any evidence support the idea that nonstandard dialects interfere with learning to read or write. Their grammars are different from the standard, but fully as systematic. But because nonstandard dialects are linked to less powerful and prestigious segments of society, nonstandard speech may trigger negative stereotypes. For example, when a job applicant's speech contains many Mexican-American dialect features, the speaker's chances of being considered for a supervisory position may be lessened.

Unfortunately, many teachers also hold negative stereotypes of nonstandard dialect speakers. It is possible that one of the reasons why children who speak nonstandard dialects often do poorly in reading is that their teachers misinterpret dialect features in the children's oral reading as mistakes. It is frustrating and defeating for these children to be constantly corrected when they have, in fact, accurately comprehended the texts. It is also possible that many teachers expect nonstandard dialect speakers to be poor students. We communicate our expectations of students in subtle ways, like withholding eye contact, cutting off their answers, or standing further away from them—behaviors of which we are rarely aware. These expectations, then, can become self-fullfilling. The students achieve less than they would if our expectations were higher. These are unpleasant portraits to paint of ourselves, but we are all subject to stereotyping of one kind or another. We can reduce the effects of our stereotypes on our teaching behaviors, but not if we refuse to face them.

Despite the frequently negative consequences of nonstandard speech, people tend to hold fast to dialects because speech patterns are deeply enmeshed in their sense of self. Few educators now believe that we should try to eradicate nonstandard dialects, not only because of the immorality of such a policy, but also because it is fruitless to make the attempt. Instead, some school systems try to promote bidialectism among speakers of nonstandard dialects. Bidialectal speakers control both a standard and nonstandard dialect, using each in appropriate circumstances. Methods for teaching a second dialect most often involve frequent drill and techniques for highlighting the contrasts between the two systems.

We believe that the emphasis in bidialectal education is misplaced. Speakers of nonstandard dialects, like speakers of all dialects, can be flexible in their language styles. Inner-city teenagers who speak a dialect known as Black English Vernacular may use a great many dialect features when they wish to signal membership in peer groups, when they wish to avoid the image of being "lame." In other circumstances, though, they use fewer nonstandard features. Some teachers have observed groups of young Black English Vernacular speakers, normally reticent in class discussion, noisily playing school during recess. In their play, the students spoke in Standard English. We believe, therefore, that most nonstandard dialect speakers possess resources for using a standard-like style of speech, even without classroom drill. They will gain flexibility in using Standard English only to the degree that they perceive the appropriateness of the standard in a wider variety of situations. We can help if we can create classroom contexts for speaking in Standard English which are authentic and nonthreatening to the students' sense of identity.

Of course, speakers of all dialects exhibit flexibility in speech. Caretakers speak differently to infants than to other adults. Children quickly learn to direct different sorts of arguments to friends ("I'll be your best friend.") than they use with parents. ("It'll get me out of your hair for a while.") When mature communicators address audiences who come from unfamiliar backgrounds, they speak more formally—enunciate carefully, avoid slang words, use complex syntax, elaborate.

We tend to think of written style as being more uniform than speech, as conforming to rigid conventions. To begin with, there is some question about how rigid those writing conventions are. Professional writers do not always include topic sentences in paragraphs. The English minor sentence, lambasted as a "sentence fragment" in composition textbooks, is also fairly common. But more to the point, contexts also exert influence over stylistic variation in writing. Complex syntax is characteristic of persuasive writing, but less so of narrative. We take more care to include explicit transition statements when writing for the general public than when we write for friends. Business writing is different from school writing, which is different from technical writing.

In learning to write, children have a hard time differentiating between spoken and written codes. Speech is appropriately context-dependent. We rely on the physical context which face-to-face participants share. "Take the one that's on the left," can be a perfectly adequate instruction when individuals are looking into the same cupboard. Writing, on the other hand, must be context-independent. A written text must be autonomous in the sense that all the information a reader requires to interpret its meaning needs to be stated explicitly. If we leave a note behind with the baby sitter, we write, "When Nicky needs a bottle, look on the top shelf of the refrigerator. Take the Yogi Bear bottle on the far left since that's his favorite." Many of the errors in beginning writers' compositions can be traced to failure to differentiate writing contexts from speaking contexts. This perspective on error is generally more useful than to whittle away at students' ignorance of the conventions of writing.

In fact, the notion of context dependence and independence (though probably not the terminology) can help beginning writers breach the scary feeling that writing is something utterly foreboding and unfamiliar. Some kinds of writing are quite similar to forms of speech with which students are comfortable. They are speech-like kinds of writing because they depend on shared context between writer and reader. By the same token, some kinds of speech are writing-like because they presume little shared context between speaker and listener. Borrowing from the work of Martin Joos, we can array both speech and writing along the same dimension of "intimate" to "frozen" styles. (See illustration on page 13.)

**Performance**

To communicate competently, then, it is necessary to read a situation and to respond to it appropriately by drawing from a repertoire of stylistic and strategic options. Yet a ball player who knows all the rules of the game, but keeps dropping the ball, will be sent back to the farm team. Similarly, competent communicators must be able to carry out their plans. Writing and speaking are, after all, forms of behavior. To be an effective speaker, you must open your mouth and talk; to be an effective writer, you must take pencil in hand and write.

Though it may seem foolish to make such obvious statements, there is an important point to be made about classroom instruction. Many students spend more time learning *about* speaking and writing than they spend in speaking and writing. There are several reasons for this, not the least of which is the burden usually placed on teachers to evaluate student performances. In neglecting performance (which after all does not *always* need to be evaluated), however, fluency in speaking and writing suffers. A pianist who does not practice will not be nimble at the keyboard. A speaker or writer who does not practice will not produce very much language.

When we speak of "practice" in speaking and writing, however, we are not talking about something divorced from a context—isolated from an audience, purpose, or setting. Communication competence is not acquired by reciting for the sake of reciting or transcribing for the sake of transcribing. Says the British educator James Britton:

> **What children use language for in school must be "operations" not "dummy runs." They must continue to use it to make sense of the world: they must *practice* language in the sense in which a doctor "practices" medicine and a lawyer "practices" law, and not in the sense in which a juggler "practices" a new trick before he performs it.**

Performance, then, pertains to the mechanics of communicating: finding the right words, pronouncing them intelligibly, or spelling them legibly, projecting loudly enough for the audience to hear without straining, and using punctuation marks so that readers can locate boundaries between ideas.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **speech:** | whispering sweet nothings; joking about old times | family conversation; party talk | business talk; teacher talk | keynote speeches; public lectures | parliamentary debate; diplomatic policy statements |
| **style:** | **INTIMATE** ⟶ | **CASUAL** ⟶ | **CONSULTATIVE** ⟶ | **FORMAL** ⟶ | **FROZEN** |
| **writing:** | journal writing; passing notes in class | friendly letters; some contemporary fiction (e.g., Richard Brautigan) | business memos; journalistic writing | academic essays; technical manuals | legal documents; scientific reports |

Students can profit from experiences spanning the full range of speaking and writing styles.

These things, too, are a vital part of communication competence, and are learned most effectively, however, not through isolated drill, but through the acts of communicating in speech and in writing.

**Feedback**

Communication is circular. Fully realized, all forms of communication involve feedback. Feedback is a crucial component of communication processes because it allows us to readjust and fine-tune our behaviors. In face-to-face conversation, we receive a continuous flow of both verbal and nonverbal feedback. When our partner says, "Yeah . . . Yeah . . . That's what I heard," accompanied by vigorous nodding, we know that we can skip background details and get on with new information. But if the listener knits a brow and frowns, we know that we should elaborate further. Even in more formal, less interactive speaking situations, we are aware of the audience's facial expressions, of shifting in seats, and rustling of papers. We have no difficulty interpreting feedback when audience members start filing out before we have finished speaking.

Although feedback is less immediate in written communication, most types of writing do allow for interaction. Personal letters elicit replies. Letters of complaint remedy or do not remedy the problem. Printed meeting announcements attract a large or small crowd. Manuscripts are accepted for publication, or not; become best-sellers or publishers' overstock. Classroom writing assignments are graded, perhaps commented on, or even hung on the bulletin board.

Writers, however, work isolated from their audiences. They must, therefore, second-guess readers' reactions. Speakers, on the other hand, are directed by listeners, spurred on in one direction or diverted to another. For beginning writers, some valuable instructional practices provide a bridge between the immediacy of face-to-face feedback and the delayed and indirect nature of feedback to writing. (In the final section of this booklet, we discuss how teachers and peers can enter into students' writing processes before the final stages, offering feedback and guidance throughout the act of writing.)

Writing, however, does offer an advantage over speech with respect to feedback. Not only can writers ultimately obtain feedback from readers, but they can also learn to "listen" to their own text-in-progress. Because writing is permanent, it affords authors the leisure to reflect on their compositions during the course of writing. Expert writers pause often, reformulate goals, and discover new lines of thought by examining what they have already written. This kind of revision occurs not only after the final punctuation mark is put in place, but repeatedly and on an ongoing basis. It is this aspect of writing—feedback between text and author—that allows writing to be especially helpful as a means for inventing new insights, and not just as a vehicle for conveying thoughts already thought.

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We have discussed communication competence in terms of sensitivity, flexibility, performance, and feedback—not as a list of skills, rules, or minimal

objectives in speaking and writing. Many such lists have been compiled, and they no doubt serve an important purpose in planning for instruction. But in the day-to-day challenge of actually working with students, it is most important to remember that communication competence cannot be reduced to atomistic components apart from meaningful expression. When we seek to foster communication skills, we are working with matters of judgment, sense of purpose, sense of community, and sense of self.

It is hoped, above all else, that this notion of communication competence is emancipatory. In speaking and writing, individuals actively engage the environment. They make choices, exert influence, and make value judgments. Communicatively competent individuals are free to move beyond the most familiar circumstances, expanding their worlds to encompass a broad range of possibilities. For such individuals, communication serves instrumental functions—influencing others to achieve extrinsic goals. Equally as important, such individuals find that communication, itself, offers intrinsic rewards—self-awareness, participation in a community.

To understand communication competence, therefore, we take a holistic view of its several facets. To understand how children develop communication competence—and how schooling fits into that process—we examine the broad intellectual foundations that support growth in speaking and writing.

## THE SCHOOL AS COMMUNICATION CONTEXT: AN INTERLUDE

The following scenario illustrates some of the speaking and writing resources children may use within a classroom language community.

Annie is a 10-year-old girl in the fifth grade. Her school is located in a middle-class neighborhood, but has a diverse population. It includes students of lower income and minority backgrounds; among them are black, Chicano, and Asian-American children. Annie performs above average in her schoolwork, although she tends to do better in science and mathematics than in social studies or language arts. She especially likes to work on "brain-teasers," and often gets the answer first. A sociable child, she likes to talk and work on school projects with friends. She has had some trouble with writing, but is becoming more fluent and confident as a result of recent classroom experiences.

Annie's teacher this year is Ted Brockton, an intelligent and thoughtful young man who has been teaching in this school for 6 years. After serving in the Navy for 2 years, Brockton returned to the university to earn a teaching certificate. He sees his classroom as a place where students talk and write to learn both subject matter and social skills. He uses all available space, with learning centers and workplaces set up around the room, and children's writing and artwork prominently displayed on bulletin boards. A visitor entering the classroom may find it actively noisy but not chaotic, as most students work on their own, with a partner, or in small

groups. At times, Brockton will assemble the children for a lesson or activity; at other times, he will move about the room helping children individually with the work. His manner is friendly but direct and self-assured, and he truly seems to know and enjoy all the children.

Annie begins this particular day by finishing a library book that she had started reading the day before. The story is a science fantasy about a boy who lives in the year 2071, and Annie is fascinated by the computer technology described in it. After completing the story, she writes a paragraph in response to it, stating that she would especially like to have a computerized ice-cream maker like the one mentioned in the story. She checks the spelling of the word "computerized" in the book and then places her writing in a box labelled "Reading Responses." She knows that the teacher will read it later and return it to her with written comments, perhaps something like, "I'd like one of those machines myself—Do you think it could make Rocky Road?"

About a half hour into the day, Brockton claps his hands and calls the students together for a social studies discussion. He wants the students to become aware of democratic processes, and encourages this through talk about school issues. The topic is lunchtime. Some students have been complaining that they do not have enough time to finish the morning's work before the fifth-grade lunchtime of 11:44. One boy suggests that they write a letter to the principal asking her to allow time to go to lunch whenever they want, but others tell him that too much confusion would result. Annie asks the teacher if he can give them more time to finish their work in the afternoon. He says that he will, but also urges them to try to use time more productively in the morning.

After this discussion, Brockton reminds the class that they have history work to complete. This is Annie's least favorite subject, so she approaches it as an obstacle that she has to hurdle to go on to more interesting things. This day, she must fill out a worksheet with questions about Andrew Jackson. Most of the questions concern factual information, and she consults the history text for the answers. However, the last question asks for her reaction to the song, "The Battle of New Orleans," that Mr. Brockton had played for the class the day before. She writes that she liked it and mentions a part of it that she especially enjoyed. As she completes the worksheet, she feels relieved, and remembering the melody, hums the song to herself as she moves on to the next activity, a geography project.

Annie, Greg, Maria, and Jeff are constructing a large poster map of the school neighborhood. They are working on Annie's immediate neighborhood area, and the others defer to her in identifying the streets, stores, and other landmarks. Greg and Jeff joke some, and Maria sits back quietly while Annie sketches in the streets. But when Brockton comes to look at the project, they all turn their attention to making the map.

At lunch, Annie sits with Maria and two other friends, Cynthia and Susan. Their talk centers on a movie that they saw the past weekend—with a few complaints mixed in about the tuna fish sandwiches and carrots on the menu. During the conversation, Susan also reminds the others that report cards will be issued next week, Maria talks excitedly about her cousin's visit, and Annie arranges with Cynthia to walk home with her after school.

After lunch, Annie returns quickly to the classroom because she is eager for the science lesson on the principles of magnetism. After discussing the concepts of attraction and repulsion, Brockton gives a set of magnets to each of six groups and asks them to experiment. Annie and the others in her group manipulate the magnets in several ways, and take delight in seeing them jump apart as the like poles are placed next to each other. They even devise a elaborate game, "magnet hockey," to see who can make the magnets repel the farthest. They write notes in their science journals describing what they have observed. The teacher engages them in a discussion, asking several to read from the journals. Jeff shares his entry, in which he has written that the magnets are like friends—sometimes they like each other and sometimes they do not. Another student extends the comparison by suggesting that friends sometimes have different interests but still can stick close together. Brockton says that those analogies might represent good ways to remember the scientific principles.

After the science lesson, Annie goes on to math work, which this day consists of multiplying fractions. Annie completes 15 such problems quickly and confidently, but has difficulty with a story problem. The teacher notices this and offers help. As he explains to her, she suddenly understands, and thanks him for assisting.

As Annie returns to her seat to complete the problem, the loudspeaker buzzes, signalling a fire drill. The students begin to scramble to get out the door, bumping into each other and knocking over books and papers. The teacher tries to gain their attention to have them file out orderly, but it is too late—most of them are on their way. Outside in the courtyard, the children are noisy and excited, some of them run around, making it difficult for teachers to establish much control.

After 10 minutes, another signal sounds, and the students clatter in disorganized fashion back to class. Brockton attempts to move students back into math work, but soon gives up, seeing that they are still distracted by the fire drill interruption. (Annie never does finish the math problem that day.)

He decides to gather them together for music, one of his stronger interests. (He is a talented guitar player, and often accompanies the children as they sing.) The class sings American folk songs and spirituals, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." One boy asks to sing "Let's Boogie," and everyone laughs. Brockton then leads them in exuberant off-key renditions of the songs that they have requested. Except for a brief altercation in which one student tells another that he sings like a frog, everyone seems to have a good time, and even the quieter children join in. This activity clearly helps to create a strong group spirit.

For the day's final activity, Brockton has the class play a softball game. Susan and Greg are the captains, and they take turns choosing players. Brockton is the umpire, and arbitrates in disputes. Going into the last half-inning, the game is tied. Annie comes to bat with players on second and third and two outs. But before she steps to the plate, Maria whispers to her that Greg is playing away from third base. Seeing this, Annie turns her body slightly at the plate and on the first pitch, hits a ground ball over third base. The winning run scores, and Annie's teammates gather around to congratulate her. Greg walks off the field disgustedly, and Annie hopes he is not angry at her.

On the way home, Annie tells Cynthia about these feelings. Cynthia tells her

not to worry, that Greg will probably have forgotten the whole incident by the next day.

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As seen in the scenario, Annie and her classmates speak and write to serve a great variety of purposes: to respond to literature, engage in dialogue with the teacher, explore social issues, identify problems and pose solutions, participate in democratic processes, make requests, express appreciation, identify specific likes and dislikes, use their knowledge and expertise, share common experience, anticipate future events, discover ideas and concepts, create meanings, record observations, ask for assistance, entertain each other, contribute to group spirit, argue, provide information, share feelings, and offer reassurance. Success in school and other contexts depends to a great extent on children's ability to communicate in diverse ways, and the successful teacher provides opportunities for them to do so.

It should be noted also that reading and listening are not neglected in Brockton's classroom; in fact, they are reinforced and enhanced by speaking and writing activities. Unlike many classrooms in which students read and listen passively, Brockton's is a place where they respond actively to what they read, and listen attentively and interestedly to what others have to say. Although less visible to the outside observer, reading and listening represent the resources from which children draw for speaking and writing. In sum, the children have an investment in reading and listening, as these provide the stimuli for sharing, exploring, questioning, imagining, inventing, and working collaboratively toward common ends.

Especially important in this classroom is the peer group. Children serve as audiences for each other's expressions, as partners in common enterprises, as fellow discoverers, as friendly adversaries in arguing opinions and interpretations, and as sympathetic and helpful friends. Talk and writing help children deal with matters on their social agendas as well as the subject matter agenda. Indeed, at times social awareness *becomes* the subject matter, as in the discussion of the lunchtime problem. And children also interact with others from different cultural backgrounds, discovering ways in which individuals bring experiences and values to bear on learning tasks. Finally, and essentially, children use their communication abilities to deal with challenges associated with peer group belonging and approval.

## A MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

Planting a seed, say, for an apple tree is a supreme act of faith and optimism. The seed contains a blueprint for what the tree will ultimately develop into. The blueprint determines that roots will sprout before the stem, that leaves will emerge to nourish the tree, and that the tree will bear apples and

not asparagus or onions. Still, the tree's growth will be affected by how much moisture it receives and how fertile the soil is in which it roots. It is hoped that rabbits will not munch on the young seedling, and that bees will track its fragrance to pollinate the blossoms. Perhaps we also learn about fruit tree cultivation, and when and how to prune back the branches to maximize the tree's production. Above all, we learn to be patient, realizing that it may be a decade before we can harvest enough apples to make a dozen pies.

We can talk about developing speaking and writing skills with the same mix of mysticism and pragmatism. Learners develop according to their own schedules and inner dynamics. But they do so interacting with the environment and with us, their cultivators. It is a mistake to assume that speech is a naturally developing ability and, therefore, requires no deliberate instruction. Students' sensitivity and repertoires grow as a function of their experiences. They refine their competence as a result of performance and feedback. Many people, for example, do very poorly interacting with health care professionals. They feel abused, do not understand medical orders, and are not motivated to comply with them. They simply lack knowledge of the appropriate speech behaviors in this difficult, but crucial, communication setting.

It is also a mistake if we assume that learning to write is wholly a matter of formal schooling, if we fail to regard the internal maturation of the learners. Careful research shows that most children know something about writing before they ever enter public school. Moreover, children's writing development is a clear reflection of their overall intellectual and emotional development. Some of the writing instruction offered in early years is motivated by a *logical* analysis of the composing task, but runs contrary to a *psychological* analysis of learners' capabilities. For example, some researchers strongly urge that teachers not expose elementary students to grammatical terminology (if, indeed, students need exposure to grammatical terminology at any age). Others suggest that too great an emphasis is often placed in the early primary years on writing as spelling out sounds.

Thus, in looking at the development of both writing and speaking skills, we refer to an interaction between minds unfolding and environments in and out of school that affect that unfolding in various ways. We have repeatedly stressed the point that communication is situated in specific contexts; context cannot be avoided when describing processes of growth.

When communicating, we are operating in three dimensions simultaneously: of social awareness, coding, and reconstruction of experience. Growth in one dimension enhances development in the others. Conversely, when students become bogged down in one of these operations, they tend to be limited in the others.

**Social awareness**

**Egocentrism and decentration.** Humans are social animals, and the drive to participate in community dwells as deeply in us as any basic instinct for

survival. Even young infants appear to be impelled to affect and be affected by others, and the roots of language acquisition lie in the primitive nonverbal routines involving eye gaze between infant and caretaker. As we mature, our abilities to understand the thoughts and feelings of others support our development as communicators.

Young children are egocentric (though not absolutely so). They are so impressed with the immediate ways of seeing, that they cannot conceive of anyone else having different perceptions. Thus, there is the familiar picture of the young child substituting gestures for words in a telephone conversation. Or the familiar interaction: "I want a cookie!" "It's too close to dinner." "But I want it now, so give it to me!"

With age and experience, we decenter—that is, we become more adept at recognizing that others' perceptions of a situation can be different than ours. A child may have a pressing need to satisfy a cookie craving, but, at the same time, recognize that the parents' need is to see that he or she eats the nutritious food that they have prepared. So the child alters his or her persuasive strategy to adapt to the audience: "Dad, I promise to eat all my dinner if you let me have a cookie." It is worth a try, anyway.

**Audience adaptation.** Social awareness is an essential ingredient of reader-adapted prose as well as listener-adapted speech. The audience in written communication, of course, is much more abstract than in oral communication. Writers must mentally represent audiences to themselves. Also writers lack access to an ongoing flow of feedback that might help them adjust messages as they compose. These factors, in combination with the mechanical difficulty of writing, pose added burdens which hamper audience awareness in writing, as compared to speaking. One type of audience, the "general reader," creates particular difficulty in maintaining social awareness, even for older students.

Despite the challenge of sustaining a sense of audience in writing, competent writers do adapt to readers. Mature writers use more complex syntax when writing for older, sophisticated readers than for a younger audience; they use more transition cues in writing for unfamiliar audiences than to friends. Similarly, mature writers take care to include background information in compositions which will be read by an unknown and diverse audience.

A classroom activity which highlights social awareness skills asks students to role-play a situation in which they deliver a persuasive message to several audiences. When the topic of persuasion is held constant, the students' attention is naturally directed to differences among audiences. In this case, a ninth-grade class practices how they might go about selling subscriptions to a school newspaper. As one student addresses his best friend, note that their longstanding relationship allows him to reveal his self-serving motivation (to win a prize) and that the speaker does not bother with civilities like requesting or thanking:

**Hey Doug, gonna buy a newspaper subscription? You can find out what's happening in school and read the gossip section and stuff. Find out what's**

**going on in the editorials and stuff. And it's only a dollar so it's a pretty good thing. And you'll get it the whole year. Buy it from me and help me out 'cause if I'm gonna get this prize I have to sell the most.**

But when the speaker addresses an unfamiliar peer, he avoids mentioning the prize, and is careful to thank his audience:

**Okay Steve, how'd you like to buy a newspaper subscription to our school paper? You can find out what's going on. And you can read about what's happening. It's only a dollar and you get it for the whole year. And it's a pretty good deal. You can find out what's happening in school and what's new and what dates are important and if there's any concerts or something you like to go to or dances or something. And I'd really appreciate it if you could buy it from me. And it's only a dollar, so you should try it.**

In contrast with this message to Steve, more formal diction and a deferential form of request are used when the student attempts to sell a subscription to a teacher at his school:

**Hi, Mr. Swenson. I'd like to know if you'd be interested in buying a school newspaper we're trying to sell for our English class to try to get money to raise funds for materials and stuff. And it's only a dollar and you get subscriptions all year. And it's a pretty good deal considering what you get. I'd like to know if you'd like to buy one.**

Another ninth-grade student makes direct appeals to her audience's values. Speaking to a school teacher, she says:

**. . . And I think you'd like it 'cause these are some of the students that you have and you can see how much you've taught them because the newspaper is part of an English class. And you can see how well they're doing. And it would be interesting to see how a young mind thinks . . .**

She is no less astute in reading her mother's sources of motivation:

**Mom, we're having a school newspaper in our grade. And maybe my work will be in it. And won't you be proud of me! And lots of your friends' sons and daughters would be in it, too . . .**

While most students are able to tailor messages to their audience's perspective, there is a great deal of variation in the sophistication that they display. As this last example demonstrates, some students need considerable work in developing social awareness in communication. Here is another ninth-grader speaking to her best friend:

> **Oh, do you want to subscribe to a ninth-grade newspaper? See, 'cause if I sell the most subscriptions I get a $5 prize. Well, it would tell alot of stuff that's going on in ninth grade and the kind of stuff you like to read. It's only a dollar and you'd get it all year.**

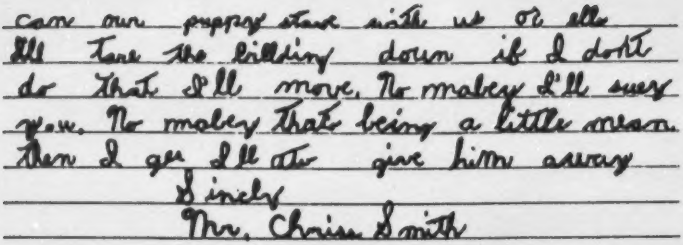
Her message to a peer stranger is virtually identical and shows an inability to distinguish between audiences:

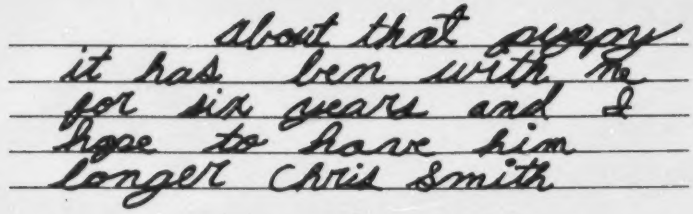
> **Hi. Do you wanna subscribe to our new magazine for the ninth grade? It tells alot about what's going on in ninth grade. And it's only a dollar. 'Cause if I get the most subscriptions, I get a $5 prize.**

We can also see varying degrees of audience awareness in persuasive writings of children. Our illustrations come from a sample of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Writing (NAEP), *The Third Assessment of Writing, 1978-79 Released Exercise Set.* The persuasive tasks in this sample specify an audience and point the writer toward convincing that audience of a particular viewpoint. Nine-year-olds were presented with the following task:

> Pretend that your family is moving to a new apartment. The landlord has refused to let your puppy live there. Write the landlord a letter, trying to convince him to let you keep your puppy in the new apartment . . . . Sign your letter "Chris Smith."

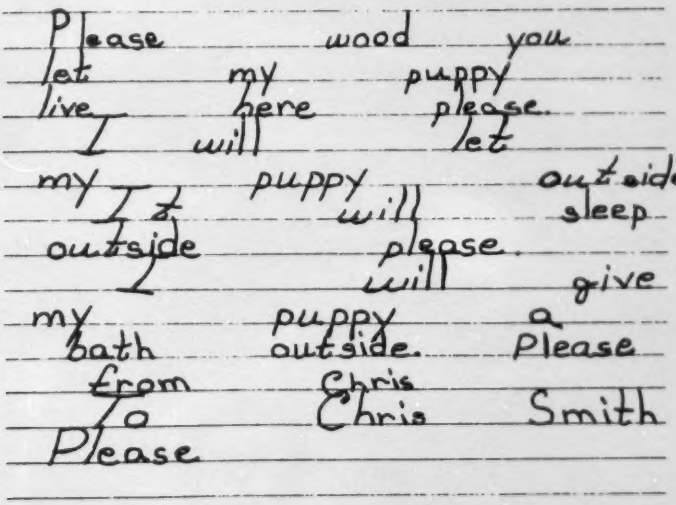
Some writings reveal difficulty with this task:


Come over puppy stays with us Or else
I'll Tare the bilding down if I don't
do that I'll move. Or maby I'll sues
you. Or maby that being a little mean.
then I get I'll ofer give him away
Sincely
Mr. Chriss Smith

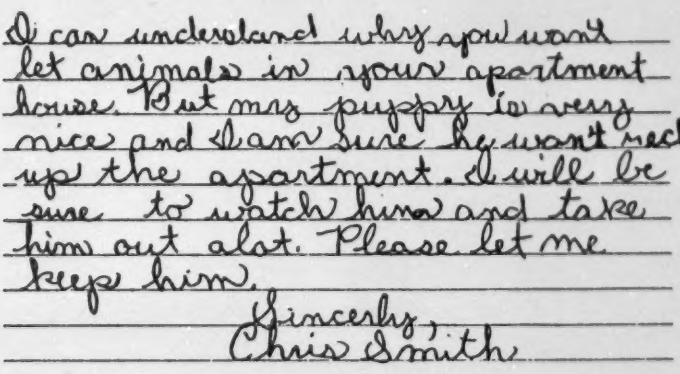

about that puppy
it has ben with me
for six years and I
hope to have him
longer Chris Smith

In addition to basic problems of fluency, qualities of egocentrism can be identified in these writings. In the first case, the writer seems unsure as to how to approach the reader—should he appeal, threaten, or simply give up? While he does consider alternatives, he does so impulsively, rather than thoughtfully. The writing also lacks politeness, which may not be the most important feature of audience awareness, but it often exerts a major impact on readers. The second writing simply assumes that the landlord knows what puppy is being referred to, suggesting that the writer is unable to take the role of his reader with respect to what information is required.

Another writing, although not much more elaborated, does show an emerging ability to consider an audience:




The repeated use of the word, "please," and the promise to keep the puppy outside indicate a sense for appealing to the reader's sympathy. As an even more dramatic example, consider the following writing:


I can understand why you won't
let animals in your apartment
house. But mrs puppy is verry
nice and I am sure he won't mess
up the apartment. I will be
sure to watch him and take
him out alot. Please let me
keep him.
Sincerly,
Chris Smith

This is a strong example of role-taking, as the writer bolsters his argument by explicitly acknowledging the reader's viewpoint.

Note, too, how this writer accomplishes her persuasive purpose:

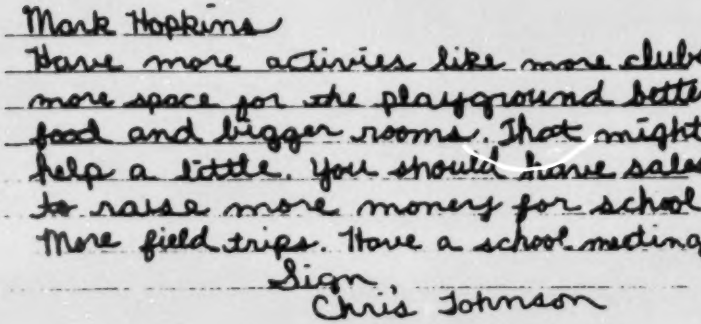
Alow me to interduce my self
My name is Chris Smith, My
family will be moving into your
Building soon, We have a puppy
And I would like to know
why you won't let us keep
our puppy in the apartment.
My puppy is very tender
and somtimes he scard of
someone. His name is Ginger.
The reson why I'm writing this
is because if you don't let
us bring him in the apartmen
t we will have to get
rid of him. I hate to see
that happen please let
us keep him

Your Truely
Chris Smith

P.S. I like it very much, if
you would let us bring him
PLEASE!

Not only does the writer show deference toward the landlord, as in the polite introduction, but also orients him toward the problem, and enlists sympathy by describing the puppy. She brings a number of arguments to bear on the issue, while remaining considerate of the reader.

Further aspects of social awareness are reflected in persuasive writings of 13-year-olds who were asked to write a letter to the principal suggesting an improvement for the school. As with the 9-year-olds, some students wrote brief, perfunctory letters:


Mark Hopkins
Have more activies like more clubs more space for the playground better food and bigger rooms. That might help a little. You should have sales to raise more moneys for school. More field trips. Have a school meetings.
Sign,
Chris Johnson

Even though the writer does identify problems and makes suggestions, the clipped, imperative statements suggest egocentrism and lack of investment in the topic. (It is entirely possible that the same writer might have more to say about a topic that he *is* genuinely interested in.)

Here is a more "impelled" writing, as it focuses on a single issue:

Dear Mary

I think one thing that would help our school alot is to have more classrooms built onto the school. Because there are so many students in just one classroom that you don't have enough room to do hardly anything that might be the reason that some students don't learn as much. Because the teacher doesn't have time to work with everyone just a few people. I really think it would help us and our school a hole lot.

Sincerely yours,
Chris Johnson
333 West Street
Eden, Ohio 99999
September 5, 1978

While not an extended argument, it does define the problem in terms that a principal would recognize as important—the effects of overcrowded classrooms on student learning. Another writer uses a similar appeal in arguing for career education:

Dear Mr. Hopkins,

I think Martin Intermediate School could be improved greatly by more career education. It appears to me that most children today don't take school seriously. They don't seem to understand that school is preparing them for the uncertainties that life holds. In career education, I think the school should bring in skilled laborers and let them tell the children how hard getting and keeping a job can be without a good education. It is a pity to see children wasting away the opportunity to prepare themselves for the unexpected. In my opinion, the school should not stand by and let them.

Sincerely yours,
Chris Johnson

While the writer adopts a condescending "adult" view of students, she also shows a singleness of purpose and ability to reinforce the main point (preparing students for the unexpected).

In both speaking and writing, then, students demonstrate increasing social awareness as they mature. They make distinctions among types of audiences and anticipate the dispositions of listeners and readers. They bring a greater number of appeals and arguments to bear on the topic and balance respect for the audience with a strong personal voice.

### Coding

**More than language.** We choose the term, "coding," advisedly, because we see it as a broader notion than what is commonly referred to as "language." Certainly, competent communicators must have strong language

skills—a rich vocabulary, ability to form sentences, a sense for conventional usage. But speech communication also includes nonverbal coding through tone of voice, its rate and volume, through gestures, eye contact, touching, and through physical space, clothing, and time. Moreover, we are concerned with communicators' control of chunks of discourse larger than sentences. Coding skill includes abilities to maintain cohesiveness across sentences, organize entire talks or compositions, establish emphasis as appropriate, and create an aesthetic effect through imagery, rhythm, and sense of sound. Finally, coding also encompasses the pragmatics of language, how language is used to express an attitude toward a subject or toward an audience, and how people can accomplish various communication functions with different language structures. For example, I might meet a coworker in the hall and say, "My car is in the shop. I'm afraid I need to impose on you for a ride home." Or I might say, "Okay if I hitch a ride home with you today?" Even though one appears as a statement and the other as a question, the intent of both these utterances is to request help with transportation. In addition, one clearly expresses a less formal attitude toward the relationship.

**Teaching language mechanics.** In speaking and writing instruction, most efforts have been a direct assault on children's coding skills. Typically, the mode of instruction is atomistic. We assume that small units must be introduced (sounds, words, sentences, and paragraphs) before larger ones (entire talks or compositions). We assume that students must learn *about* these structures, in isolation, before they can learn to *use* them in context. The net result is too often a curriculum that is so busy with code that it has little time for communication. Students are so occupied with worksheets that they have little time for interacting with each other or with their environment.

We can only speculate about why this state of affairs has become so common. But we do know that the massive research literature on the subject strongly concludes that lessons about language structure do not improve students' communication skills in writing or speech. We know this by looking to our experience as well. Year after year, we review parts of speech, predicate nominatives, and gerunds. While some students (perhaps destined to be English teachers) enjoy this work for its intellectual challenge, most students learn rules of grammar and usage just long enough to pass a test, if they learn them at all. We perpetually ask 10th-graders, "Didn't your ninth-grade teacher cover this material?".

And why should it be otherwise? We learn to drive a car by driving with a trusted and experienced driver at our side, and do very well without ever understanding the organic chemistry of petroleum combustion. Except for the few of us who specialize in automobile repairs, we learn what little we know about engines out of some real need (e.g., to keep oil levels where they need to be, or to understand a repair bill). Indeed, we could barely make it out of our driveways if we had to constantly think about pistons and cams and distributor rotors. This is not to say that language mechanics are not important; only that students assimilate norms of standard language usage and structure when they perceive a need to do so during the course of authentic writing or speaking activities.

**Making connections through grammar.** One of the characteristics of coding in the early school years—and one of the ways in which early writing is similar to speech—is the unsophisticated use of connectives for signalling relationships between ideas. Mature communicators use a variety of connectives to indicate how two ideas relate ("therefore," "whereas," "nevertheless," "although"). For youngsters, however, cohesion is accomplished by indiscriminately using three connectives: "and," "so," "then." This oral narrative was produced by a fourth-grader working with a desk-top stage and dolls.

> **Let's see. Um, this one kid went um in this one room. Um, I mean this . . . Well, this kid's mother told him that he couldn't go outside *and* he wanted to go out real bad *so* he snuck out *and* his mother didn't know it *so* he went to this real old shack *and* he went inside looking around like *and* he found this gun like *and*, um, he wondered where it came from *so* he went upstairs *and* he looked around *and then* he saw this treasure like *and then* there was alot of money and jewelry and stuff in it *and then*, um, this one guy he, he, um, yelled at him *so* the little boy he ran outside *and* the next day, um, um, he went back up there *and*, um, he went back upstairs again *and* he didn't see anybody *so* he went in this one, um, door, *and* he looked around *and* there was all this valuable stuff that the guy had stolen *and then* he went home *and* told his mom *and* his mom called the police *and* the police got him *then*.**

This passage shows some ambiguous pronoun reference, typical of egocentric language: "This one guy he yelled at him," "The police got him then." While one can eventually figure out who the "guy" is and who all the "hims" refer to, it requires some effort on the part of the listener to do so. Mature speakers minimize this kind of listener effort through explicit reference.

**Developing a sense of story.** As children learn about structures for linking two contiguous sentences, they also learn about the structure of entire pieces of discourse. Most children are immersed in the narrative form from an early age. Much of their informal instruction from caretakers comes packaged as stories, and most beginning readers are storybooks. Nevertheless, they do not master the "grammar" of storytelling until they acquire some maturity.

A first-grader tells a story in response to a colorful circus painting:

> **OK, it's summertime and I went to a circus. And they were having a parade. And I saw some clowns, elephants, and some . . . two tigers in a cage, and some horses, and there are some clowns with flags, and there are some clowns on horses, and there's a clown in the middle waving. And there's some bears, lions, and tigers . . . . That's the end of the story.**

The storyteller begins appropriately enough by creating a setting. She soon lapses from past tense reporting to present tense describing, however. She sustains few elements of action or plot.

The next story, told by a fourth-grader, does maintain a sense of action, but there is none of the conflict and resolution necessary for creating a real plot:

> **Well at first that guy just got out of the wheel chair with the broken leg. And his friend brought him a present. And he's already well. The doctor is leaving. And he's saying he's alright. And this guy with the present is gonna sorta drive him home. And he says thanks to the doctor.**

A fifth-grade student builds some rising action and even attains some minimal closure. She also begins with a more stylized story opener:

> **One day a clown and a circus was riding along, going to a county fair. One day the tigers and the elephants and the clowns were riding along and the clowns were playing and the elephants were dancing and the horses were parading around. When they finally got to the circus fairgrounds the horse and the elephants in their cages and all the people gathered up and got the circus almost ready. All the people were ready and three days later they were finished so they went on and went to another fair.**

The story conveys a feeling of potential climax through expressions like "finally got to the circus," "all the people gathered up," and "circus almost ready." However, no climactic event actually emerges. Eventually, this student will incorporate a sense of motivation, and perhaps also a sense of character development, as she develops greater control over story structures.

In writing, too, there are these developmental aspects of coding and narrative structure. These illustrations are drawn again from the NAEP sample, this time from writings of 9-year-olds in response to a picture of a girl trying to catch fireflies. Some students clearly had difficulties with mechanical skills:

her hand is in the air
I see light bug a she is
having fun in summer
and how she is to
if I don't know will she
is eath lightbug

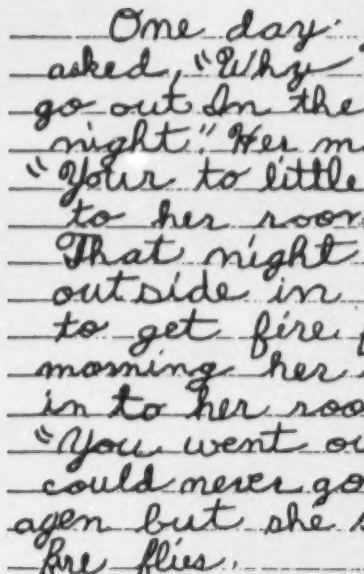
The girl is getten lighting bugs.
When she get one she put it in a
jar. Next she is going to put in a
dark places.

The problems with handwriting, spelling, and punctuation are immediately noticeable. More crucial, though, is the lack of fluency and the inability to produce a greater number of words and sentences in the allotted time. It suggests that for children like these, writing is at best a chore, as they have yet to develop the motivation or confidence with writing that enables them to produce more discourse. Mechanical correctness is unlikely to emerge until that fluency is established.

In contrast, note what another 9-year-old does with the same topic:

One day when I looked out of my window I saw small lights flashing, I thought it was an invasion from outer space. I was very scared, so I went outside to see wat it was. I thought was it an invasion? No it wasn't, but I didn't know it, so I decided to try to catch whatever they where. I asked my mom if I could borrow a jar, she said, "Yes." Then I went outside with the jar the lights started to move away so I tried going after them, but they where to fast. "whoosh" my jar flew to catch one, but I missed it. Then I put the jar down, and I tried catching them with my hands "Pow." I missed agian finaly one last try, I cavgt one! I really did. But it wasn't an invasion, it was only fireflies.

Here is an elaborated story written with expressiveness and enthusiasm—the use of sound effects, exclamations, varied punctuation, and personal voice reveals that the child has an investment in the writing. It appears that she enjoyed writing, as the next writer apparently did:


One day Jan Thompson asked, "Why can't I ever go out In the woods at night". Her mother answerd, "Your to little". Jan went to her room crying. That night she went outside in the wood to get fire flies. On the morning her mother came in to her room and siad, "You went outside". Jan could never go in the woods agen but she still had her fire flies.

Although the style is not as exuberant as in the previous writing, the use of dialogue (with nearly correct punctuation) suggests an involvement in the story, a concern for relationships, and what parents and children say to each other. In placing themselves inside their stories, these two writers have discovered a purpose for writing, and correspondingly a purpose for observing the structural and mechanical conventions of written discourse.

Skill in coding, then, includes more than just narrow sentence building, but also comprises the ability to express logical relations among events. It encompasses the ability to structure whole pieces of discourse. Coding skill comes about not so much as a result of direct instruction in the "basics," but in response to real communication situations. In both speaking and writing, children develop coding abilities by producing discourse that will be listened to or read by others.

**Reconstruction of experience**

**Language as a way of knowing.** Centuries ago, two astronomers lay on their backs, side by side observing the starry skies. "Look over there to the North," said one. "There's a great bear, and across from it, there's a little

bear." "I don't know what you're talking about," said the second astronomer. "But there's a big dipper and a little dipper, just as sure as the sun revolves around the Earth."

The world does not present itself to us with prepackaged meanings. We learn to discern meaning of the world by fitting events and objects into sensible categories. Sometimes, we force the world into patterns that make sense, as when we see bears or dippers in the heavens, hear accusation in the voice of a parent who has come in for a conference about his child, or label politicians as either conservative or liberal. This view portrays humans as actively interpreting the world, rather than passively absorbing it.

Speaking and writing are vehicles for sharing knowledge with others. But they are also instruments for helping us to make sense of things. The notion that we think thoughts and then clothe them in words is too narrow a view of what happens when we use symbols. The processes of thinking and of "languaging" occur simultaneously, and are not altogether distinguishable. By searching for words to express ourselves, we discover what it is that we have to say. By linking those words in syntax, we discover relationships in the world.

Writing, in particular, is a powerful way of knowing. Many professional writers talk about their ideas "emerging" as they write. Many eschew preliminary outlines because they reject the idea that they can know where they are heading before they begin to write. The novelist E. M. Forster is quoted as asking, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" Even those who do use outlines alter their plans as new avenues of thought reveal themselves. In writing this pamphlet, too, we began with certain concepts of what constitutes communication competence, although we had only vague ideas of what we would include in the work. We talked between ourselves, and that helped us clarify our approach. We wrote a brief prospectus, then talked some more (and listened to the reactions of friends and colleagues). Finally, we reached the point when we knew we simply had to begin writing in earnest to fully understand what we thought about the subject. During the course of writing, we changed some old ideas and obtained some altogether new insights. We cycled through the processes of talking, writing, and revising several times, refining ideas at each stage.

**Inventing subject matter.** People crave certainty and predictability, but when facing a blank page, they must make a leap of faith that they will find the ideas to fill it. They may feel less anxious knowing that the act of writing, by its very nature, promotes thought. Because writing permits the writer to re-view ideas, it extends the capacities of the mind. The writer can stretch out thought over time, reflect, reconsider, allow previous ideas to launch new associations. James Britton and his associates suggest a simple experiment that will allow you to see this. Think of a topic which is abstract, but not unfamiliar: "Why do people feel lonely," for example. If you were to begin writing about the topic, you would, no doubt, create some very interesting insights. But try writing about it with a stylus on carbon-backed paper. You lose writing's potential for permitting re-vision, and you will likely discover that you are able to write but little on the subject.

The advice, "think before you speak or write," as it turns out, is not entirely good counsel. Countless promising ideas have withered on the vine as a result. If we wish to promote speaking and writing as agents of thought, then we must often respect the tentativeness of students' messages. We must give them ample time to finish assignments, and encourage revision. And we must avoid a wolf-pack classroom climate which pounces on errors of form and thus smothers a spirit of risk-taking and discovery.

**Learning to support ideas.** Communication competence, itself, is one aspect of children's experience about which they rarely reflect. But children do show increasing abilities to generalize about the topic. A group of students was asked to explain why some persuasive strategies work better than others. Given a choice between pleading ("Give it to me, c'mon, c'mon, give it to me.") and offering an incentive ("If you give me the ball, I'll let you play with my game."), most students said that the bargaining strategy would be most effective. But a fourth-grader justifed her choice rather egocentrically:

> **It's better because it just is.**

Her classmate offered a rule of politeness:

> **It's not nice to keep on saying, "C'mon, c'mon."**

One eight-grader, in contrast, was able to justify the pleading strategy on the basis of fairly advanced, if narrowly pragmatic, social awareness:

> **I'd say, "C'mon, c'mon" 'cause it would bug her alot and then she'd give her the toy just to get her to stop.**

The beginnings of generalization can be seen in this fourth-grade youngster's reply:

> **I think that little kids whenever you say, "Give me something," I don't think they do, 'cause my mom's sister they just got a little baby and whenever his older brother says, "Give me that," he says, "No." But when he asks him nicely, he says, "Yes."**

The rationale's weakness is that it generalizes from a single case. An important advance in reconstructing experience is learning to use analogies. Here, a high school senior achieves considerable effect, as well as economy of expression, by means of an analogy:

**People do what you want more when you're nicer. Even if . . . They can even know that you're being nice just to get something for yourself. Like when they give something away at a store or something. They, They're just doing it because, so you'll go to their store. But at least it makes you feel like they want you to feel good or something. So say, "I'll give you the game."**

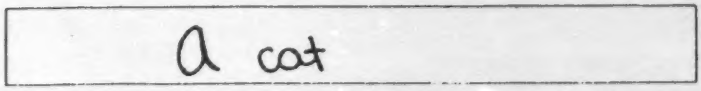
Children's writings also reflect these signs of growing ability to reconstruct experience, and to generalize and create analogies. The following NAEP task, given to 9-year-olds, encouraged this kind of thinking:

**Sometimes it is fun to think about what it would be like it would be like to be something besides a person . . . .What would it be like to be a goldfish? Or an airplane? Or a horse? Or a tree? Or any other thing? . . . Think about what you would like to be . . . Then write about what it is like to be that thing.**

The task enabled children to relate what they already knew to a situation requiring an original response:

A Horse

You can roam through the hills. And you could play as long as you wanted. And you could eat as much grass and you could drink all of the water you wanted. You could let people ride you. And You could pull a cart or a wagon with someone in it. And maybe someday you would be a racing horse and win a race.



a cat

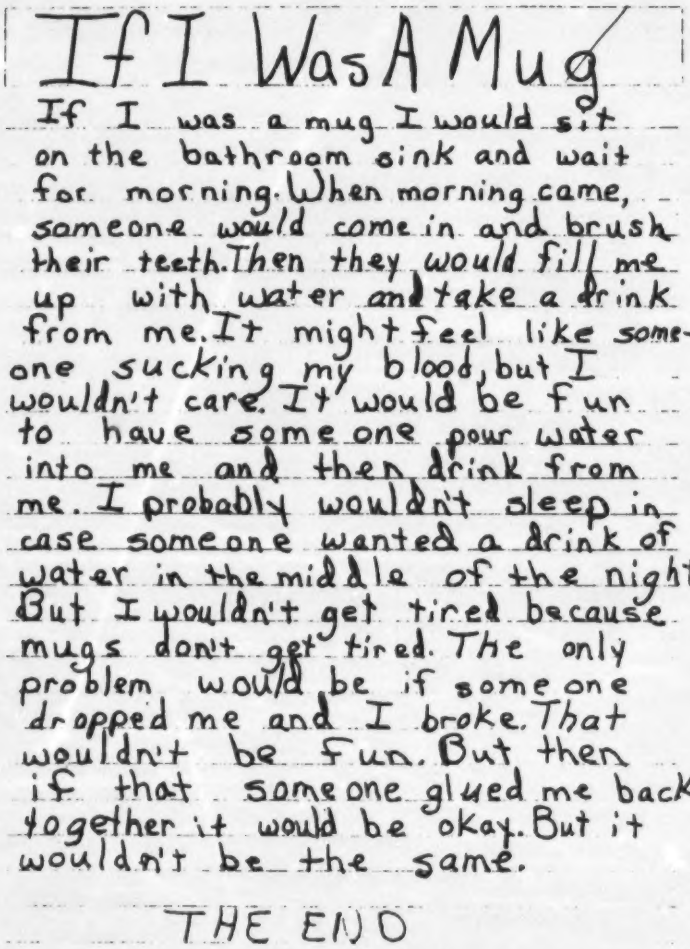
If I were a cat I would sit by a warm fire and lick my paws and drink warm milk. And in the early morning I would run outside and jump merely in the wind. I would run up a tree and down again. I would chase birds and mice and jump happily in the wind with the sun on my face. I think it would be nice to be a cat. Don't you think so too? I know I do! It would make me happy to do such things.

The End

In these pieces, the writers describe a variety of things that they could do if they were the animal, revealing an ability to generate original ideas and

to provide concrete details. The second writing also contains a direct address to the audience, as the writer seeks to involve the reader in the imaginative experience.

Another writing on the same topic reveals an even more advanced thinking process:



If I Was A Mug

If I was a mug I would sit on the bathroom sink and wait for morning. When morning came, someone would come in and brush their teeth. Then they would fill me up with water and take a drink from me. It might feel like someone sucking my blood, but I wouldn't care. It would be fun to have someone pour water into me and then drink from me. I probably wouldn't sleep in case someone wanted a drink of water in the middle of the night. But I wouldn't get tired because mugs don't get tired. The only problem would be if someone dropped me and I broke. That wouldn't be fun. But then if that someone glued me back together it would be okay. But it wouldn't be the same.

THE END

Here the writer has not only identified pleasant things that might happen to a mug, but also shows the other side of the story. The series of sentences beginning with the word, "but," indicates that the child is considering possible alternatives as well as solutions to problems. This is an impressive performance for a 9-year-old.

Growth in speaking and writing, therefore, is closely intertwined with intellectual development, as children learn to construct meanings for themselves. While thinking ability certainly contributes to language performance, opportunities for reconstructing experience in talk and writing can also contribute significantly to thinking ability.

## INTERDEPENDENCE AMONG SOCIAL AWARENESS, CODING, AND RECONSTRUCTION OF EXPERIENCE

We separate communication development into three dimensions, primarily for analytic purposes. In operation, however, no dimension exists apart from the others. In discussing reconstruction of experience, for example, we have introduced the concept of coding as a problemsolving instrument that allows us to make sense of the world. The opposite is also true. If we cannot make sense of some event—if we cannot find a viewpoint—we talk or write about it in strained and stilted language.

Consider also the interaction between social awareness and coding in writing. As mentioned, written language is context independent. Reference is explicit, meanings are elaborated. Unskilled writers often violate these requirements, however. A common problem is ambiguous pronoun reference in writing: "Jeff and Mike were walking to the skating rink. It was nighttime and there were no lights. So then he tripped and twisted his ankle so bad he couldn't walk any more." This type of error does not reflect ignorance of the rules for using pronouns; rather, the problem here is egocentrism. From the perspective of the writer, it is perfectly clear who fell. But readers cannot get into the head of the author, except insofar as the explicit text allows them to do so. Skill in providing sufficient detail, organizing ideas, and indenting paragraphs to break up the flow of writing, all are dependent largely on social awareness. And sometimes, students, to the amazement of everyone, can produce clean, error-free language when they perform tasks which allow them to speak or write to real audiences for authentic purposes.

Similarly, there is an important relationship between social awareness and reconstruction of experience. Figuring out what to say often presents a major stumbling block to students in both formal speaking and writing assignments. Teachers offer students the advice, "Talk about something you're familiar with." But choosing a general topic area is only a fraction of the difficulty. After all, how would you begin to write a three-paragraph theme about teaching, something with which you are no doubt familiar? Unsuccessful at finding a way into a topic, students often turn to uninspired rehashes of encyclopedia and news magazine articles: "Brazil is a fortunate country. It has many natural resources. The natural resources make it a great country in South America." But when you can create for yourself a sense

of audience, the ideas begin to flow more readily. Talk about teaching to a person who taught you 20 years ago. Talk about teaching to an audience of computer programmers. (Does it at least suggest a metaphor you can play off of?) Talk about teaching to a group of disgruntled taxpayers. One way in which we can help students exploit the relationship between social awareness and reconstruction of experience is to be an audience for them. If students know that there is a trusted adult at the receiving end of their messages—someone who seeks to understand their viewpoint—then it will do much to free up their process of creative thinking.

Sometimes, when children are called on to discuss a particularly abstract subject, they simplify the task by making it more concrete. Often, this coping strategy takes the form of redefining a general audience in more identifiable terms. Thus, children may construct a second-person "you" audience when they confront a difficult problem in reconstructing experience. Explaining the rules of a game is one such taxing communication task. In this passage, a fifth-grader tries to maintain an abstract, generalized tone, but slips back and forth into concrete second-person address:

> **First of all, one person takes the two birds and hides them behind their back and switches them around. Then takes those birds out. The other person takes . . . picks a hand. And you either get a yellow bird or a blue bird. Then the person who chose one will take the blue and yellow chip and throw it. If it lands on the yellow side up . . . and the yellow . . . If you're yellow you go first. If you're blue and the blue side shows up you'll go first. To start the game you start at the color dot. You zoom up the board on the black spot. And then um, then, um, if you got to go first take the cup with the die in it and roll. And when you get a color you move to that spot. The yellow bird is like on the yellow then the blue moves up to the yellow line. He has to go back. He can't move up there. So, so . . . And if you have to you have to move back.**

There is a clear relationship between fluency and use of a concrete "you" audience in this speech sample. We can predict when the speaker will revert to the second person by noting her hesitations or repetitions. These are the spots where she finds it difficult maintaining a generalized orientation, and so she simplifies the task for herself by adopting an audience which is more immediate and familiar.

**All together now**

It is pleasing, and enlightening, to discover pieces of discourse in which the child has "gotten it all together," in the sense of interweaving social awareness, coding, and reconstruction of experience in skillful and successful ways. Here is such a piece, written by a 13-year-old in response to the "Letter to the Principal" task:

Dear Mrs. Hopkins,

Our school needs an air conditioner. It is hard to concentrate on school work with such heat. Sweat drips into my eyes when I work, and my shirt sticks to my back.

I think we could ask the school board for money. Donations could make up for the remainder of the money needed. To get these donations, we could have a carnival, sell candy, and ask each child and teacher to bring a small donation.

I think all students could work much better if they were comfortable and relaxed in a cool climate. I, for one get aggravated and disturbed when I am hot. Therefore, I cannot do my best work. Please consider getting air conditioning for this school.

Sincerely,
Chris Johnson

The writing is fluent and follows accepted conventions of spelling, handwriting, usage, and sentence structure. It demonstrates a strong sense of audience, addressing the reader politely but also directly and succinctly. It presents a reasoned, cogent argument. Most importantly, though, the writer has not sacrificed his own voice for the sake of making a point. He both identifies and personalizes the problem (he cannot work well when it is too hot), and poses a solution for raising money to pay for the air-conditioner. The expressive elements, then, make the letter appealing and ultimately convincing.

## CONCLUSION: TEACHING FOR COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

For many teachers, coding may seem to present the greatest challenge to students. Problems with the mechanics and structure of language are often the first aspects of students' talk and writing which teachers notice, and many spend a great deal of time trying to help students overcome these problems. It is easy, though, to confuse symptoms with causes. At the heart of these problems is lack of fluency, difficulty with producing language confidently and spontaneously. Exercises designed to correct mechanical errors put the cart before the horse, and often take precious time away from actual speaking and writing experiences. What seems to be efficient turns out to be inefficient if the foundation for effective coding is not first established.

To accomplish that purpose, we would argue for an emphasis on expressive discourse, the free-flowing record of thought and feeling that helps students build fluency in communication. As seen in Ted Brockton's class, students discuss experiences, problems and observations, and record ideas and impressions in journals or other free-writing formats. Teachers respond to writing and guide discussions in such ways as to help students break through obstacles to expression. They encourage students to capture the conversational and expressive qualities of speech in their writing, as well as adapt the vocabulary, diversity, and planned qualities of writing to their talk.

Sentence-combining is one instructional technique designed to improve students' coding skills at the level of sentences. Sentence-combining exercises present students with two or more shorter sentences and ask them to create a longer sentence without leaving out any information. Given the cue sentences, "Isaac sat under the apple tree," and "Isaac discovered the law of gravity," I might combine the two to read, "While sitting under the apple tree, Isaac discovered the law of gravity." Some sentence-combining exercises direct students to combine sentences into specific constructions. Others are wholly nondirective and permit students to explore all the syntactic options. (As an interesting diversion, see how many ways you can combine the two sentences about Isaac. Did you get this one: "The law of gravity was discovered by Isaac who sat under a tree which bore apples.")

Regular practice in sentence-combining encourages students to use more complex syntax, and also helps them improve compositions. But since there is no absolute link between complex syntax and quality of expression, we believe that the benefits of sentence-combining come about because the exercises make students sensitive to the varied possibilities inherent in language. Students enjoy discussing the merits of different ways of phrasing the same ideas. ("It was an apple tree that Isaac sat under when he discovered the law of gravity"—a good promotion for apple growers.) Significantly, sentence-combining instruction is most powerful when it is accompanied with as *little* direct instruction in grammar as possible.

To promote social awareness, we see the need to take advantage of the various classroom audiences. Teachers can emphasize "relationship-making," viewing the classroom as a language community in which students interact

and share with each other as well as the teacher. Communication reveals itself not only in dialogue between teacher and student, but also in a complicated network of relationships. As in Brockton's class, children share ideas, work collaboratively on projects, identify and solve problems (both academic and social), contend with each other (most often productively), and offer help and reassurance. They come to see each other as important resources for learning and support, and thus add to their social awareness.

This is not to diminish the importance of teachers' leadership, however. Most children look to teachers for direction, approval, and decisiveness. But teachers need not sacrifice those roles for the sake of building a strong communication environment. If anything, their leadership is enhanced, as children come to regard them as trusted adults and role models, rather than inflexible authority figures.

The role of leading a group enterprise is nowhere more apparent than in the ways teachers structure discussions or writing processes. In oral work, they should allow students to express ideas and opinions freely, but also control those who tend to dominate, draw out quieter ones, and guard against instances of children hurting each other's feelings. Role-playing of social dilemmas can be an especially effective technique. Similarly, in writing instruction, the teacher should set up opportunities for students to write to and receive response from a peer audience, but also take care to establish a supportive atmosphere for those interactions. Children need to be shown how to respond to each others' writing, and teachers need to step in at various points in the process to help students generate ideas, consider how they might make their writing better, and revise and edit accordingly.

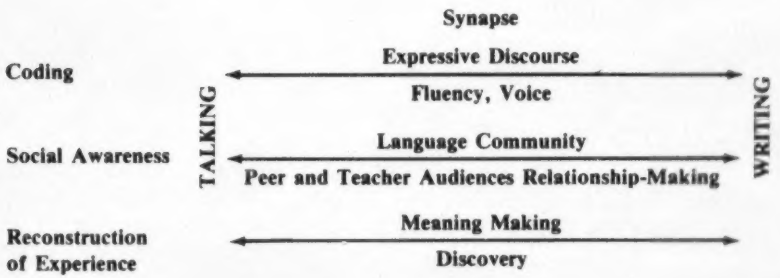
The classroom as language community, then, creates a connection between the available audience in speaking and the unseen audience in writing. In particular, the peer audience serves as a transition from personal to public writing. And correspondingly, the sense of a reader gained through writing contributes to a stronger awareness of the listener in spoken discourse.

Finally, the successful classroom offers students many opportunities to reconstruct experience, to use language to discover and make sense of what might otherwise be chaotic impressions. Our concern here is the making of meanings; few media allow us to do that as well as speaking and writing. As teachers, we often assume that students can learn simply by the one-day transmission of our own knowledge to them, and we are frustrated when they do poorly on tests. In the classroom as language community, however, students talk and write as a means of coming to know things for themselves, in their own ways. Brockton's lesson on magnetism serves as a good example, as students created their own analogies for understanding attraction and repulsion.

In addition to those activities described in our scenario, many others offer possibilities for reconstructing experience. Teachers might have students role-play historical events; record the growth processes of plants or animals; interview older people or other community members; take sensory walks and write about their observations; respond to newspaper articles and editorials; write letters to friends or strangers; share reactions to magazine articles,

books, movies, and TV shows; brainstorm ideas for writing; produce stories, poems, scripts, and a personal essay; help each other in revising, editing, and proofreading; and put together a classroom newspaper or literary magazine. What is important is that teachers provide these varied ways for students to make their own meanings and share those creations with each other.

Clearly, between speaking and writing abilities, certain gaps exist for most children. To bridge those gaps, we need to create (to borrow a term from physiology) "synapses"—spark-like connections resulting in release and transmission of energy. For coding, the synapse is expressive discourse, stressing fluency and personal voice as bridges to gaining control of form and conventions. For social awareness, the synapses are relationship-making and the building of language communities, as means toward corresponding successfully with various audiences. And for reconstruction of experience, the synapses are meaning-making and discovery, as ways of achieving the power to make sense of things through language. These synapses are represented in the following diagram:




As teachers, we might ask ourselves some questions to see if these synapses occur within our classrooms. Do we give students opportunities for expression in conversation and journal writing? Do we encourage them to communicate in personal and honest ways? Do we create conditions in which students share and interact with classmates? Do we look for signs of growing social and linguistic development? Are we taking advantage of the peer audience for responding to writing, as well as responding ourselves in helpful ways? Do we allow students to experiment with speaking and writing in various forms and to various audiences? Are we encouraging them to forge expressions of meaning from the materials of their experience, thought, and language? And do we show them in as many ways possible that we value those expressions?

If we can answer "yes" to these questions, we will be supporting our students as they build communication competence in speaking and writing.

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